

A CRITIQUE OF DR. LAURA SCHLESSINGER

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The following article is from the PsychoHeresy Awareness Letter, November-December 1996 (4137 Primavera Road, Santa Barbara, CA 93110) --

There is a widespread concern about the "victim mentality" that prevails in our culture. Popular personalities such as John Bradshaw have promoted victimization to such an extent that it appears no one is responsible for anything anymore. Even though child abuse is a very real and urgent concern in our society, it is important that adults, even those from abusive backgrounds, acknowledge responsibility for their actions.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger, with her nationally known daily radio program, has stepped in to fill the void. Her loud call to responsibility fills the airwaves every day, reaching homes and offices across the country. According to a recent article from Insight Magazine (September 16, 1996), more than 15 million people throughout the world are tuning in, with over 75,000 actually calling her weekly radio program. In addition, her two books are found prominently displayed in local bookstores: *Ten Stupid Things Women Do* and *How Could You Do That? As Christians*, how do we respond? Do we jump for joy that someone--anyone--is finally speaking up and calling for responsible action? Or do we look more carefully to see if her call is genuinely biblical in quality?

Surely we must take the latter course. As we do, we will discover that Schlessinger's message comes up empty, leaving us with perhaps even more despair than the false message of victimization. As believers in Jesus Christ, we want to offer hope to one another and to the world we live in.

SCHLESSINGER'S EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF MAN

A strong belief in evolution underlies much of what Schlessinger has to say about issues such as conscience, morality, integrity, and honor. She urges her listeners to become "more fully human" by making choices that are morally right. She continually urges against falling into "animal" behavior.

Humans, and only humans (not animals), have the ability to make moral decisions. However, it's not because of being "more highly evolved" (*Ten Stupid Things*, p.155), but rather because of being created by God in His image and for His glory. People are responsible for their actions before God. Schlessinger offers only a responsibility to self, to maintain self-respect and rise to a level higher than the termites. This isn't a biblical motivation, nor is the evolutionary basis

biblical or adequate. Only the image of God is a sufficient basis for moral excellence and responsibility.

SCHLESSINGER'S "PERSONAL MORAL CODE"

As Christians, we must humbly exhort one another to follow God's standards, as revealed in His Word. When another person becomes entangled in sin, we are commanded to restore him in a spirit of gentleness and humility (Galatians 6:1-5). The best Schlessinger has to offer is an individually determined "personal moral code." Such a view inherently allows for any sort of "morality" or immorality. Thus Schlessinger's radio advice is an imposition of her own personal moral code, not God's standards. Such imposition is a demonstration of arrogance. On what basis is her "moral code" superior to that of anyone else? Unless the standards are determined by God, the Creator and ultimate Judge of all the earth, there is no basis whatsoever for universal moral absolutes. Schlessinger stands on sinking sand. Christians, having been given God's absolute moral standards through the Scripture, uphold those standards in humility, knowing that all have sinned, that no one is righteous (Romans 3:10-18,23). We minister in love to restore those who have fallen into sin, balancing biblical truth with mercy and compassion.

RELIGION: RULES OR RELATIONSHIP?

On those rare occasions when religion is mentioned at all, Schlessinger clearly equates it with a set of rules to be followed. "Conscience" is defined as the internalization of such rules.

The Christian enjoys something so much better—a relationship with the living, resurrected Lord. God's laws are holy, righteous, and good, given for our good and His glory. Schlessinger is more concerned about the "pragmatic intent" of religious rules than about honoring God with our obedience.

PRAGMATISM

Schlessinger's writings repeatedly emphasize the consequences of one's moral decisions. Those consequences are both internal and external, involving both self and others. Christians would initially share Schlessinger's concern about the welfare of children in situations where the actions of adults leave them in broken homes. However, Schlessinger's general focus on consequences is one that omits God from consideration. Believers are first to love God with their whole being, then to love others as much as self. Love for God is the only foundation for demonstrating biblical love to others. The consequences are a secondary consideration.

BRUTALITY VS. COMPASSION

Schlessinger's tone is often harsh and offensive. This is not surprising, in view of the arrogance involved in imposing one's "personal moral code" on a large audience. A biblical approach to ministry is one of both truth and mercy. We cannot compromise God's revealed standards; they

are not ours to compromise. At the same time, we are all equally guilty of violating God's holy, righteous standards. We're all in the "same boat." No one is righteous, and all those who enjoy eternal salvation are saved by God's grace (Ephesians 2:7-9). Salvation is based on the righteousness and work of Christ in satisfying divine justice. Knowing this, we are compelled to speak in humility and gentleness to all, even on occasions where a strong rebuke may be required (2 Timothy 2:24-26; 1 Corinthians 5). The apostle Paul instructed the Corinthian church to reaffirm their love for a repentant brother, so that he wouldn't be overwhelmed with sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). The biblical qualities of compassion and humility are missing from Schlessinger's hard-hitting approach.

VICTIMIZATION REVISITED

Schlessinger emphatically rejects the heavy feeling-oriented emphasis of the "victim mentality," to the point where she often displays an "I-don't-care" attitude toward the pain of others. However, there are places in her books where we discover that she hasn't really abandoned the "victim mentality" she criticizes. She maintains the existence of a strong connection between childhood trauma and adult behavior which can be helped by psychotherapy (Ten Stupid Things, p.204). What she does is to shift the primary emphasis away from seeking "insights" into past history, to taking responsible action in the present.

As Christians, we must reject the assumption that childhood trauma causes specific reactions. We are born with a sinful nature, and we therefore respond sinfully to our circumstances, whether good or evil. In the work of Christ, we have hope and answers to our predicament. We can take responsible action in the present because of what He has done in the past. All Schlessinger can provide is yet another "self-help" program, despite claims that her plan is something new and different.

SELF-ESTEEM: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Much modern psychology enthrones self-esteem as a worthy goal. Schlessinger doesn't repudiate the goal; she simply seeks it through different means. Some psychologists want to affirm "self-worth" or "self-esteem" without any consideration of works or efforts. "Being" is exalted over "doing." Schlessinger reverses the order and insists that self-esteem be earned through good works.

Note the distortion of the Christian gospel. When self-worth is based on mere "being" rather than "doing," self-worth (or self-esteem) replaces salvation. Schlessinger continues to substitute self-esteem for salvation, but in her scheme it is based on human effort. Biblically, self-esteem is not a proper goal. We were created for God's glory, not our own.

SIN, GRACE, AND THE GOSPEL

Having based moral excellence on an evolutionary scenario rather than on man's creation by God in His image, Schlessinger has no concept of sin. Life makes no sense without a biblical

view of sin. Man was originally created good and upright, in the image of God, but he violated God's command and fell into sin. To that first sin we trace all of the evil and misery that has occurred throughout the centuries. Schlessinger's view of "sin" (a term she never uses) is primarily a violation of one's own moral code. Thus is it against self rather than against God. This grossly underestimates the seriousness of the problem.

Meanwhile, Schlessinger exalts the efforts of self to bring about change. In view of man's enslavement to sin, this leads ultimately to despair. Scripture shows us both man's inability to overcome sin on his own (Romans 8:7-8) and God's gracious enabling of the believer to live a new life through His Word and Spirit. It is because God is at work within the Christian that he is able to make godly changes. Meanwhile, the good news of the gospel assures believers that Christ has paid the full penalty for their sin, satisfying divine justice. The Christian is reconciled to God and credited with Christ's righteousness. He can thus proceed with thanksgiving, hope, and the assurance of God's grace. Nothing of God's grace ever emerges in Schlessinger's writings, so the reader is condemned to another self-help program-and despair.

In closing, let us consider how the gospel is turned upside down by the messages of modern psychology. First, psychologists view man's condition as that of victim, while the Bible views man as a sinner responsible before God. Schlessinger's call to responsibility is one that doesn't declare the biblical view at all; she exalts the influence of childhood as much as those she criticizes. Secondly, the solution is reversed. The psychological "gospel" insists that man the victim must nevertheless save himself, that no other hope is available. The true biblical gospel is that man, although guilty, cannot possibly save himself. God, abundant in love and mercy, graciously intervenes to do what man is unable to do for himself. Salvation is wholly His work. The psychological perspective is one of cold injustice and despair. The biblical truth is a message overflowing with the good news of God's gracious free gift in Christ.

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